



## CHAPTER 3

# Confronting the Limits of Dialogue: Charlottesville, 2017

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Phylissa Mitchell, and Erin Pappas*

*On the night of [August 11], my wife, several library colleagues, hundreds of others, and I were effectively held hostage in St. Paul's Memorial Church on University Avenue across the street from the University's Rotunda. The neofascists were terrorizing the campus with the now-infamous tiki torches. We moved to the interior of the main room fearing an attack coming through the windows.*

—Dave

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*In August, white supremacists came to do harm; no amount of dialogue would have stopped them or changed their mind, nor would ignoring them have made them go away.*

—Abby

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*The same rhetoric did not attach to the May tiki torch rally, or the one on [August 11], with their preppy, khaki-clad, respectable-looking (whatever that means) individuals. Our preemptive response to their anticipated presence was to act like we were preparing for college debate finals, armed with programming, information, and facts. Maybe we could convince them to rethink their racism! Maybe we could sit down and explain to them why a white ethno-state isn't desirable! They, as we later found out, came armed.*

—Erin

*...I noticed a helicopter hanging motionless over downtown. Stationary. It was too great a temptation for a recovered journalist to pass up. As I approached the downtown mall, I was amazed so few streets were closed. I turn left on Water Street and parked. People were running helter skelter in my direction, frightened and fleeing. "What happened?" I was out of my car, clutching a Black kid's arm.... "They killed a whitewoman," she panted. "They drove a black Mustang into the crowd and killed some whitewoman...."*

—Phylissa

## Introduction

In the summer of 2017, multiple white supremacist gatherings were held in Charlottesville, Virginia.<sup>1</sup> These gatherings attracted national attention and were, for some, a shocking reminder that white supremacy has always been prevalent, and visibly present, in our communities. As librarians at the University of Virginia,\* we have struggled to reconcile these events with our professional practice. It may seem like an unmitigated, incontrovertible good to promote openness and dialogue from a distance, but how do we respond when faced with blatant racism and outright violence? How does operating in this volatile environment affect our relationships—with colleagues, students, faculty, and the community? How does it shape perceptions of the library, especially when many continue advocate for neutrality amidst crisis?

## Methods and Structure

The “we” of this introduction is a fiction demanded by the form, constrained by academic conventions. We understand each of us is sited, as a subject, and use the following pages to examine our responses to that summer and group reflections to work through the demands our profession makes on us. Typographic distinctions, nomenclature, and formatting distinguish individual narratives from shared reflections.

We created four prompts to structure the chapter. In it we speak individually and collectively. The prompts ask us to think through our orientation to this place, this institution, those events, and into the future. They are numbered and indicated in **boldface**. Individual responses are distinguished by the use of our first names. When “we” speak together, *italics* are used. What we strive for, and hope the reader will recognize, is neither programmatic consensus nor prescriptive solutions extrapolated from context. We point up our differences—in race, gender, biopolitical history, and memory—with space for consensus and critique.

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\* Hereafter abbreviated as “UVA.”

Our methods, too, layer selves, histories, and ways of engaging with the world. Among these we count oral histories, interviews, self-reflexivity, autobiography, heteroglossia or multivoicedness, and above all, autoethnography.<sup>2</sup> Our collaborative and critical autoethnographic intervention bridges the distinction between “evocative” and “analytic” forms of this method.<sup>3</sup> We contribute a “reflexive and self-critical methodological stance” that “engages in the politics of reality and intervenes in it.”<sup>4</sup> We end by discussing ways we have engaged in self-reflection, critique, and attempts at change—through teaching, outreach, community building, and activism—in our local context.

## *Background: Summer 2017, Charlottesville, Virginia*

Three events took place during the summer of 2017, purportedly in response to an ongoing debate about Confederate monuments in Charlottesville. In March 2016, a local high school student, Zyahna Bryant, wrote a petition to remove the Robert E. Lee statue from a public park. The issue gained traction in the community, and the city council appointed a commission to investigate how to handle the monument. In January 2017, the commission delivered its recommendation to either remove or contextualize the monument in place. After a week of deadlock, the council voted to remove the Lee statue.<sup>5</sup> The contentious decision was made in an already tense environment: Donald Trump had just been elected president; white supremacists seemed emboldened.

In May 2017, Richard Spencer led a rally in Lee Park<sup>†</sup> to protest the council’s decision. Participants, carrying tiki torches and dressed in the alt-right uniform of khakis and polos, chanted “You will not replace us.”<sup>6</sup> The rally was short-lived as it was quickly interrupted by counter-protesters. There was no official response from UVA, nor from the library.

On July 8, 2017, the Ku Klux Klan held a rally in Justice Park<sup>‡</sup> protesting the decision to remove the Robert E. Lee statue.<sup>7</sup> A larger community came to protest, although UVA suggested that the right response was to stay away. In an university-wide email on June 27, 2017, then-President Teresa Sullivan encouraged attending programming instead, saying, “To listen and respond to these outsiders would only call more attention to their viewpoint and create the publicity they crave.” A “Welcoming and Inclusive Space” was set up in the library for students on July 8, 2017, for discussion, reflection, and reading. This was the only official university response.

On August 11 and 12 (A11/A12), the “Unite the Right” Rally took place. Although A12 shocked the country, Charlottesville’s residents knew it was coming.

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† This park was named Robert E. Lee Park until June 2017, then Emancipation Park until July 2018, when it was renamed Market Street Park.

‡ Justice Park contains the Stonewall Jackson statue and, until recently, bore his name. As of December 2018, the park has been renamed “Court Square Park.”

Local coverage focused on the rally organizer's plans, including debate over granting Jason Kessler a permit to hold the event in the first place. This time the university and library had a planned counter-response, billed as a "Day of Reflective Conversation," with library spaces set aside for conversations, films, panels, and presentations related to racial justice. When the governor declared a state of emergency on A12, the university closed. Though the events were canceled, the library stayed open.

## Who We Are

**Abby Flanigan:** My title is Research Librarian for Music and Performing Arts, which is largely a public services role focused on research and curricular support for the music and drama departments at UVA. I started here in January 2017, shortly after graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. At the time of these rallies, I had been in my position and in the working world for less than a year, so I write from the perspective of someone new to Charlottesville and UVA.

**Dave Ghamandi:** I am UVA's first Open Publishing Librarian, and I lead *Aperio*, the university's open access press. I've been at UVA since 2012 and got my start working in libraries in a middle Tennessee public library in 2009. The simplest way to describe my professional practice and community work is that I'm slowly becoming "as radical as reality itself."

**Phylissa Mitchell:** I am UVA Library's first Director of Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity, tasked with advising the dean on inclusive and equitable policies relating to hiring, workplace climate, and programming. I joined UVA Library as a paraprofessional in 2014, coterminous with adjunct teaching at Washington and Lee School of Law. I taught First Amendment law and journalism skills in a number of programs and in Ukraine on a Fulbright. Before law school and teaching, I wrote for newspapers and produced television news. Clearly I am the geezer of this bunch with a work history demonstrating my lack of a discernable attention span.

**Erin Pappas:** My official title is "Arts and Humanities Librarian." I liaise with Slavic, linguistics, media studies, and women's and gender studies. I've been in the profession, on and off, since my first public library page job at the age of fifteen in Lexington, Kentucky, where I grew up and earned my MLS in 2005. I am middling in all respects: midlife, midcareer, middle class, middle American, and with left-of-middle (but bourgeois) politics.

## Prompt 1

**What is the "UVA identity?" How do we negotiate the tensions therein and in our relationships with the community?**

*Erin*

My previous university had its own complicated entanglements with the commu-

nity, the neighborhood (Georgetown in DC), and the continuing legacies of slavery and racism. I went from one place grappling with those histories to another. I grew up in a horsey college town aspiring to be a place like Charlottesville: “nice,” “happy,” “safe,” “pleasant.”

The “UVA identity” inflects differently, depending on who’s talking. I’m not a WASP, but I am white, and I know that identity sits more easily for me as a professional staffer than for Grounds, facilities, and dining services workers: underpaid, overworked, subject to seasonal employment. They may be “legacies” in their own ways, but streets, parking lots, benches, and buildings haven’t been named after them. Increasingly, those people live in Albemarle and surrounding counties rather than Charlottesville proper, which at the time of the last census was 18 percent African American and 67 percent white.<sup>8</sup>

UVA reflects the fundamental disconnect between an idealized America—benevolent, humanist Enlightenment project—and the reality—a nation founded on genocide, slavery, and exclusion. Architecture and the trappings of place contribute to the myth making about the nation’s founders, Jefferson in particular. Critique of these practices comes from faculty and student groups, but it’s always met with pushback.<sup>9</sup>

Racism thrives here; it’s not confined to country clubs and frat parties. It’s frustrating to hear people act as if white nationalism doesn’t reflect “who we are” with origins “outside the community.” It was born here in race laws. It flourished in policies meant to protect the property-owning white plantation class above all. Yet people really don’t like to hear this. One only has to think about the “benevolent slaveholder” narrative attached to Jefferson or the Rotunda plaques memorializing Confederate soldiers, the forgotten terrors of Jim Crow, segregation, the KKK, the birth of eugenics right up the road at our hospital, the destruction of Black commercial neighborhoods in Vinegar Hill, the lack of affordable housing....<sup>10</sup>

## Abby

It’s hard not to be aware of the history of this school every day. I work directly across the lawn from the Rotunda, designed by Thomas Jefferson and designated a UNESCO world heritage site. Jefferson is invoked in nearly every official communication from university administration and in promotional materials from the university. Even the language we use is a reminder: it took me months to call campus “Grounds” and freshmen “first-years,” jargon that Jefferson coined that is still used today.

As UVA graduate Jia Tolentino wrote in *The New Yorker*, we can’t pretend there isn’t a correlation between this fetishization of tradition (i.e., rich, white slaveholding men) and the white supremacy that has flourished here.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, many people recognize this fetishization as harmful and are actively work-

ing against it. After the 2016 election, faculty and students petitioned President Sullivan to stop quoting Jefferson in official communications: "...although some members of this community may have come to this university because of Thomas Jefferson's legacy, others of us came here in spite of it."<sup>12</sup> Faculty members, staff, and students are working to push the university to reckon with its own history, with some notable successes, like the recent President's Commission on Slavery and the University, working toward illuminating and confronting the university's historical relationship to slavery.<sup>13</sup>

## Phylissa

I am hyper-local, born, raised, and educated here. For as long as I can remember, this area's attitude towards race has been one of plausible deniability. First evolving into the "People's Republic of Charlottesville"—so liberal as to be seen as communistic—contemporaneously with the then all-male, all-white UVA dropping its required shirt-and-tie attire for classes. It began admitting Black (men) students "in bulk," so to speak, in 1969. By 1972, when I enrolled in the second class of women, one of eighty-seven Blacks in a class of 2,000, UVA was slouching toward unadulterated hippie-ism.

Like all southern states, the Commonwealth of Virginia was quite keen on "massive resistance"—a strategy that deliberately ignored the "all deliberate speed" edict of *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*.<sup>14</sup> The 1954 landmark Supreme Court decision that integrated US public schools, *Brown* is actually five cases the court combined because they argued the same legal question: "...does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other 'tangible' factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities?"<sup>15</sup>

*Davis v. County School Board* was one of the *Brown* five and the only one in which students were plaintiffs.<sup>16</sup> Prince Edward County is about an hour due south of Charlottesville. Public schools there closed for five years to avoid race mixing. In Charlottesville, the elementary and high schools for white students closed for one year.

Albemarle County encircles Charlottesville and took a more measured approach to massive resistance. It went on a building spree, partly demanded by demographics. More babies were being born between 1944 and 1958 than at any time in human history. This boon of babies meant that the county could build two new schools for "Negro" students, exact replicas of schools built for white children, but with tattered books and scarce supplies. Still, Black parents were more comfortable sending their children into a milieu they knew. They clamored to retain the all-Black Jackson P. Burley High School, which graduated its final class in 1967.\*

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\* It is now a middle school.

By 1967, apartheid in Charlottesville and Albemarle slowly eroded. The “Whites Only” water fountain was gone. The balcony of the Paramount Theater was no longer “Colored.” In earlier days, Count Basie, Ramsey Lewis, and James Brown were forced to perform at the Armory (which, in fact, is an armory) and lodged overnight at the all-Black Elks Home. A few years later, the Supremes, the Temptations, and the Miracles played at UVA at Memorial Gymnasium. But racism had not picked up her skirts and fled the vicinity. At a brand-new arena, University Hall, Dionne Warwick and Jackie Wilson were treated so shabbily, Warwick swore she would never return to Charlottesville. To date she has not.

My first year at UVA, a couple of classmates drove into the county for a church service but instead happened upon a KKK rally replete with sheets and hoods. Reporting the incident during Black Alumni Weekend of 2017, they were as scared and shaken as they must have been more than forty years earlier.

In the late 1990s to 2000, a serial rapist managed to elude law enforcement in Charlottesville for nearly a decade. The city police’s response? They stopped more than 200 Black men and swabbed their cheeks based on eyewitness descriptions of a “youthful looking Black man.” They persisted, and a Black UVA student sued.<sup>17</sup> In the waning hours of St. Patrick’s Day, 2015, a Black fourth-year student, Martese Johnson, was wrongfully assaulted and arrested by police officers from the Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control Alcohol, who claimed he had presented false identification to get into a bar. He had not, but images of a bloodied Johnson on the sidewalk pleading, “I go to UVA” instantly went viral. Johnson sued and settled for \$250,000. It was not the first time ABC attacked a UVA student. Three years before that, agents pulled a gun on a sorority girl because they mistook her purchases of water for beer.

Two years later, two Virginia alums brought their sickening brand of nativism to town.

## Dave

Within Charlottesville and when meeting peers across the country, I’ve often felt the need to apologize for being part of UVA. I want to show that UVA is not monolithic and that many come and remain here despite Jefferson’s legacy. In this regard, UVA is not different from other neoliberal universities, though it has an amazing ability to normalize whiteness and privilege. Its love of its own traditions and history masks a history of white supremacy, patriarchy, and class reproduction, while making wealth hoarding appear as “common sense.” The institution rarely moves into discomfort. Critical voices concerned with truth, justice, and the plight of the most oppressed are pushed to the margins.

It took me a while to realize that UVA reproduces those uneven power relations. As a result, the issues that I care about as a critical librarian are usually avoided, minimized, opposed, or co-opted. I try to be kind to myself for taking



what feels like too long to learn how power and knowledge flow through UVA and its libraries. It's been comforting to find others—mostly students and community members—who've been critiquing the institution for a while. There's a collective memory within Charlottesville's marginalized communities of people who never had the luxury of waiting for UVA to live up to its purported values. As a Brown man and son of working-class immigrants, I identify with this community. My position requires me to play an inside-outside game; to be a border-crosser between the professional-managerial class and working-class people in the community. I grapple with being a revolutionary socialist and trying to make the concerns of the least among us matter in a neoliberal space. I also ask myself, borrowing Cornel West's words, "How can I do it with style and a smile?"<sup>18</sup>

## Abby, Dave, Erin, Phylissa

*The UVA project, as imagined by its creator and reproduced by subsequent administrations, is remarkable in its grandiosity. The university imagines itself to be central to the creation of "human knowledge, the education of leaders, and an informed citizenry."<sup>19</sup> This monolithic image of enlightenment allows UVA to gloss over tensions between professed ideals and problematic history. There has always been a tradition of critique, of calling out these contradictions. Many have pushed UVA to reckon with and correct for the white patriarchal structure on which it was built, like the four women in 1969 who sued UVA with the help of the ACLU for its restrictive admission policies. As a result, Virginia Scott became one of the first women to attend UVA under full coeducation.<sup>20</sup> Among them are the Black Student Alliance of 1975, which demanded the university address Black student concerns, resulting in the Office of Minority Affairs (now the Office of African-American Affairs) being established.<sup>21</sup> On A11, the multiracial UVA Students United bravely faced the neofascists where they asserted their right to occupy this space. After A11/A12, the Black Student Alliance, in a continuation of its tradition, created new demands as well.*

*The threats have evolved. What does it mean to critique and resist in the age of the neoliberal university?<sup>22</sup> How far, how hard can we push to reform the system of which we are part? Within our day-to-day jobs? What does it mean to engage in "dialogue" when the university's voice drowns out all others? When it demands civility? While purporting to speak for everyone using the reanimated and cherry-picked words of Thomas Jefferson? Such are the core tensions in our community.*

*To demand justice raises the stakes still further. We see it in the differing reactions to A11/A12, between those who identified the white supremacists as "agitators" who came from "elsewhere" and those who recognized the racist legacy of the community itself.<sup>23</sup> To engage in "dialogue" demands we navigate between two poles of awareness, yet while understanding that our interlocutors may not accept the preconditions at all.*



## Prompt 2

**How did we engage with the UVA Library's official responses to the events of the summer of 2017?**

### Abby

I volunteered to work on August 12. I wanted to do something that day, but what exactly to do was a choice many Charlottesville residents struggled with.<sup>24</sup> I protested in July, unsure of whether it was the right response, since it felt we were giving oxygen to the KKK by being there. I was glad the library provided an alternative for those who wanted to avoid the white supremacists by facilitating engagement with racial history and justice in a peaceful environment. In hindsight, I can see how different the July and August rallies were, and I now question whether I made the right decision. In August, white supremacists came to do harm; no amount of dialogue would have stopped them or changed their minds, nor would ignoring them have made them go away.

Although the event was ultimately canceled and I had my own misgivings about whether I should have been there, the library had done something. In July, few used the spaces, yet they were grateful for some official response. Staying open after the state of emergency was declared was largely symbolic, showing that we refused to be bullied into closing. Such gestures can't be where our work begins and ends, but they're better than nothing at all.

### Dave

The relatively low engagement with official library events, especially by marginalized folks, was in many ways due to a lack of physical and psychological safety. Teresa Sullivan claimed the neofascists would be "interested merely in seeing Mr. Jefferson's architecture and Lawn," but a UVA police captain had already notified his superiors about plans for a campus "tiki torch march" on A11.<sup>25</sup> After the violence, Sullivan shifted blame onto students, pointing her fingers and saying, "Nobody elevated it to us. Don't expect us to be reading the alt-right websites. We don't do that. Now you guys have responsibility here too. Tell us what you know." Clearly, members of the communities—ones that I'm part of or act in solidarity with (both on and off campus)—cannot afford to trust the university. What trust had existed was shattered on A11.

The onus is on the institution to move beyond offering "safe spaces" and leading traditional forms of "dialogue." UVA and the City of Charlottesville both repeatedly, and unnecessarily, made proactive statements defending the free speech rights of white supremacists, even after they committed violence. This doesn't jump-start

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\* Sullivan later apologized for the remarks.

much-needed healing and dialogue, which my communities are rightly suspicious of. “Dialogue” sponsored by power tends to pacify true movements for liberation while generating good publicity for hegemonic institutions. This was the case with the city’s “Dialogue on Race,” leading to skepticism about UVA’s efforts.<sup>26</sup> The Graduate Students Coalition for Liberation created the “Charlottesville Syllabus,” a vital grassroots response after A11/A12 that was supported by several of us in the library.<sup>27</sup>

I want to participate in dialogue that is consciousness-raising, counterhegemonic, and liberating, not vacuous or disconnected from action. It should create individual and collective agency and be anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-fascist. Reflective dialogue can help cure our collective crisis of imagination by providing people with the words and ideas necessary to envision a better future and that infuses us with hope. I’m indebted to work of Paulo Freire and Antonio Gramsci for waking me up in this area.

## Phylissa

I planned *not* to engage in the library’s planned response to A12. I introduced a librarian to her fiancé, they were marrying out of town, and they’d asked me to officiate.

Attribute it to magical thinking, but I was wishing/hoping/praying A12 would be a yawn. Then around 11 p.m. on A11, I received a text and call from Dave reporting that several hundred khaki-wearing, tiki-torch-wielding fascists and neo-Nazis had trapped him, his wife, and other peace gatherers in a church close to our library. I switched on to international coverage of something happening half an hour from home.

Next afternoon, after promising my family I would avoid hot spots, I set out in search of an officiating-a-wedding dress. Returning home, I noticed a helicopter hanging motionless over downtown. Stationary. It was too great a temptation for a recovered journalist to pass up. As I approached the downtown mall, I was amazed so few streets were closed. I turned left on Water Street and parked.

People were running helter skelter in my direction, frightened and fleeing. “What happened?” I was out of my car, clutching a Black kid’s arm. She whipped around. “They killed a whitewoman,” she panted, “They drove a black Mustang into a bunch of people and killed some whitewoman....”

I was not surprised. I was pissed off. It was like they stomped onto my wet and varnished floor and took a crap on it.

## Erin

I was involved in the same wedding as Phylissa, following everything from social media, texting friends who were protesting, and reading the news. Emails were

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\* The vehicle was a gray Dodge Challenger.

flying around, and rumors were everywhere. I became increasingly incensed at the university for its inaction during the torch rally. How could they have been so naive? It's not like the fascists had been silent on social media beforehand. The unfolding events were documented by witnesses and participants and spread quickly on Twitter and Facebook. A few weeks prior, I'd been alerted three times in one afternoon to the presence of a bear near the Children's Hospital. I get messages when there's a robbery, a sexual assault reported, a fire downtown. For literal Nazis? Not a blip.

Class doesn't seem to have been made explicit in a lot of these conversations either. Need-blind aid aside, "Mr. Jefferson's University" still retains its genteel image and actively promotes it. This isn't a place that welcomes working-class or first-generation students. That's a huge part of the appeal, and it's easy enough to dismiss overt and ugly racism as arising from somewhere, *someone* else. It was easy to dismiss the KKK as marginal, fringe, and abhorrent, as President Sullivan did in her official communications. The same rhetoric did not attach to the May tiki torch rally, or the one on A11, with their preppy, khaki-clad, respectable-looking (whatever *that* means) individuals. Our preemptive response to their anticipated presence was to act like we were preparing for college debate finals, armed with programming, information, and facts. Maybe we could convince them to rethink their racism! Maybe we could sit down and explain to them why a white ethno-state isn't desirable! They, as we later found out, came armed.

## Abby, Dave, Erin, Phylissa

*The library's officially sanctioned efforts to promote dialogue in the face of these rallies was met with differing reactions—including enthusiasm, skepticism, and indifference. We use this prompt to reflect on what those efforts accomplished.*

*Dialogue is assumed to be an inherent good. Dialogue forms the cornerstone of pedagogical tactics (e.g., the dialogic or Socratic method), "serve[s] democracy, promote[s] communication across difference, and enable[s] the active co-construction of new knowledge and understandings."<sup>28</sup> Yet the dialogue our institutions encourage is value-laden in opaque, less-obvious ways. Educational approaches and dialogic modes of communication, even critical ones, "entail their own latent prescriptions...and so inevitably encounter a limit to their capacities to be self-reflexive and self-problematizing."<sup>29</sup> In other words, the modes of dialogue "that put the greatest emphasis on criticality and inclusivity may also be the most subtly co-opting and normalizing."<sup>30</sup>*

*Libraries should strive for dialogue with their communities and constituents, however imperfectly, yet we must interrogate the precepts of that dialogue. Who sponsors it? What voices does it uphold, and which does it exclude? Who is allowed to speak? In our planning for the summer of 2017, the UVA Library as an institution sponsored events that addressed revisionist history, whitewashing, silencing dissent. Yet the A12 events were scheduled to take place the morning after UVA violated trust, allowing*

*white supremacists to march freely and attack students. It seems beyond arrogant to demand that marginalized people engage in institutionally sponsored dialogue if we cannot assure the safety of their very bodies. We may find a recent analogy in ALA's tone-deaf attempts to make space for hate groups in the Library Bill of Rights, making the argument that "all sides" deserve equal access to meeting spaces, without acknowledging the real threat of violence such groups carry for specific populations.<sup>31</sup>*

## Prompt 3

**How did the personal and professional intersect in our responses to the events of summer 2017?**

### Dave

On the night of A11, my wife, several library colleagues, hundreds of others, and I were effectively held hostage in St. Paul's Memorial Church on University Avenue across the street from the University's Rotunda. The neofascists were terrorizing the campus with the now-infamous tiki torches. We moved to the interior of the main room, fearing an attack coming through the windows. Eventually we snuck out the rear entrance, cut through an alley, and made our way toward Alderman Library. Heading down Rugby Road, we could see and hear the torch mob in front of the Rotunda. Only after we got home did I find out that they attacked students and colleagues. After witnessing the lackadaisical police response that night, I knew the next day would be worse. Needless to say, after experiencing A11, watching neofascists terrorize our town with impunity on A12 and murder Heather Heyer, and learning that my colleague Tyler Magill suffered a stroke due to his injuries, I had to do more.

A struggle for social and economic justice always underpinned my library practice, but after A11/A12 it became much more localized and connected with my non-library activism in unforeseen ways. The line between my personal and professional identities blurred. Others engaged in the struggle for justice locally, and most were not directly affiliated with UVA. In the months afterward, Noam Chomsky's and Henry Giroux's thoughts on being a socially responsible academic and, more importantly, Walter Rodney's concept of the "guerrilla intellectual" stuck in my head.<sup>\*32</sup>

In a twisted way, A11/A12 created more community. I joined a broad group of justice-minded folks, including coworkers, in a struggle to demand answers, accountability, and change from the institutions enabling white supremacy and refusing to protect us. This struggle was waged in multiple fronts, with different tactics, and it continues to this day, albeit with less publicity. New forms of solidarity brought me into contact with neighbors, community organizations, and

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\* I feel a personal connection with Rodney because he was a radical professor who was murdered for his activism in Guyana, my parents' birthplace.

student groups. UVA Students United, which I consider the most important student group on campus, held events in the fall (including a “Disorientation” and multiple direct actions) after A11/A12. The “BLOOD ON YOUR HANDS” banner that students held in city council chambers when the community took over the August 21 council meeting became iconic.

While having unexpected interactions, collaborations, and moments of solidarity with neighbors, students, faculty, and coworkers, I questioned my proper role. I attempted to spark much-needed dialogue within the community by engaging in radical truth-telling, or parrhesia, and bearing witness. My privileges afforded me the ability to literally speak truth to power and ask uncomfortable questions, especially toward city officials. My library skills like information gathering and synthesis allowed me to contribute to the community in other ways. It was like applied information science because shouldn't we be about seeking, sharing, and using knowledge and truth?

Since A11/A12, colleagues, some only acquaintances, have stopped me in the hallway or come by my office. People share their family histories, want to know the latest news, or simply provide encouragement. I search for ways to steer these necessary conversations toward collective action. I'd already applied library skills to community activism and deepened my study of revolutionary history and organizing. Black radical history and thinkers, including Cornel West, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X, Robin D. G. Kelley, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, and the revolutionary work of the Black Panther Party and Cooperation Jackson in Mississippi, spoke in a way that made sense to me. I studied them to apply their lessons to my activism, but found that they had meaning for me in libraryland as well. I've been pushing for open access and more just scholarly communication since library school. The Black Panthers' and Cooperation Jackson's praxis, rooted in self-organization, self-determination, and cooperative systems, informed that work and my scholarship in new ways.

## Erin

Start of the semester is exciting—new students wide-eyed and uncertain, returning students greeting one another with shouts and hugs, Grounds looking perfectly manicured (thanks to scores of people working to make it so), the bathrooms still clean (ditto)—and that felt desperately necessary. There was discussion about how to teach after A11/A12 and the student activism Dave mentions, but it struck me that people were doubling down on normalcy. During those first weeks back, my emotions were all over. One moment I was shaking with rage, violently over-protective the next. I kept returning to how terrified the parents must have been, dropping their kids off at a white nationalist flash point. Students come here from all across the state, but especially the Northern Virginia suburbs, Richmond, and Hampton Roads areas.<sup>33</sup> There's privilege in those places, but they're also racially,

linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse. How could students thrive if their basic safety was in question?

It's difficult to disentangle my personal and professional personas, not that they've ever been far apart, when politics makes demands on both. I want to amplify voices that need to be heard, ones other than my own. Phylissa likes to say that women reach an age when you're no longer threatening; I have my whiteness in addition. I try to parlay that into moving the needle, however slightly, here. Good intentions count for very little, the same way that white liberal guilt *qua* "dialogue" isn't going to drive real change in this town, county, or country. But that doesn't mean the conversations aren't worth having, particularly when they take place at a conservative institution in a risk-averse, self-effacing profession.

## Abby

For many of us, the line between personal and professional identities was collapsed by that summer's events. I'm a relatively new librarian and tried to keep my personal and professional lives very separate. It seemed to be a more "professional" practice, as I was concerned with being taken seriously. This anxiety underpinned my first six months here, but after A11/A12, a lot of that went away. There were much more important things to focus on.

My job is frontline and, like Erin, I am protected by my whiteness, so my most immediate reaction was concern for the incoming and returning students, particularly students of color. Torch-bearing Nazis had marched on the lawn, outside student rooms, without any notification from the university or response from campus police. Students were expected to start school as usual the following week. There were a lot of homegrown efforts at preparing to support them. Faculty talked about pedagogical responses to the attacks; counselors from the counseling center talked with library staff about supporting students experiencing trauma. Even with these interventions, I felt completely unprepared. It was my first fall semester here. I'd been worried about how to structure instruction sessions; now, overnight, my concerns pivoted to whether I would be able to recognize the symptoms of a student suffering from PTSD. It was a jarring experience and certainly put things in perspective. It was hard to focus on "library work," or even to understand what meaningful library work would look like.

## Phylissa

A11/A12 forced me to dig deeply into a well of patience I never knew I had. UVA is one of only two US academic libraries with a staff member exclusively in the exceptionally complex, uncomfortable inclusion, equity, and diversity space.\* My

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\* Michigan is the other one.

joke is that I'm paid to live under the stairway on Privet Drive. Libraries and librarians have historically been ultra-female and uber-white. I worried the antics of A11/A12 would subdue recruitment efforts to the library. We attracted seventy candidates to our two ACRL Diversity Alliance resident positions. When asked a candidate why he applied despite A11/A12, he responded, "Y'all got a perception problem."

I'm far more deliberate now than when I began in 2016. I devote a lot of time, thought, and training to race. This follows the institution's decision to reckon with its deplorable history in the form of the President's Commissions on Slavery and one on Segregation and the University. The Dean of Libraries has mandated an "Understanding Difference" performance goal. Each staffer is required to "plan and document at least one conversation/year with a person whose life experience is different."<sup>34</sup> My focus on race is because Black and Brown people are the objects of white supremacists' hate, because white supremacy created my institution. It is so little understood by white people. Some is genuine ignorance, you don't know what you don't know, à la Debby Irving, the woman who "got woke" in her 40s.<sup>35</sup>

Sometimes I'm imbued with missionary fatigue. The here-we-go-again with the privilege talk, explaining yet again that you have it. Your response to that is yours alone. If you cry, I will try my damndest not to comfort you. If you get angry, don't direct it at me—direct it at the system that coddles ignorance and permits people to wallow in entitlement. Occasionally I become enraged at the lexicon: "microaggression (it ain't micro when you're subjected to it); "white fragility" (holding all the power leaves *you* insecure?); "Black rage" (clearly Emmett Till, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, and on and on, woke up one morning thoroughly pissed off after centuries of abuse and committed crimes against a white woman, white law enforcement...). Wait, as UVA's newest president writes: what?<sup>36</sup>

So A11/A12 were affronts professional and personal, with heightened not-in-my-backyard fury and disgust. I'm as puzzled by white supremacy today as I was fifty-five years ago, standing in line waiting to get to the balcony of the Paramount Theater, where "Colored Only" were forced to sit. I mean, the balcony is the best seat in the house.

## Abby, Dave, Erin, Phylissa

*As a profession, librarianship can require us to merge the professional and the personal. Working in a library is often regarded as central to one's identity, and the work we do (teaching, negotiating, advocating, collaborating) requires building relationships that extend beyond the professional sphere. Recent scholarship—on emotional labor, burnout, and resiliency—levels critique at these ideas, especially the notion of librarianship as a noble profession that demands the loving sacrifice of the self.<sup>37</sup> Writing on vocational awe and the library, Fobazi Ettarh challenged the idea "that libraries are*



*inherently good and democratic, and that librarians, by virtue of working in a library, are responsible for this ‘good’ work.”<sup>38</sup> Profession-wide, we see an increased interest in and openness toward self-critique, and, in doing so, examining the underlying power structures upon which our profession is built.*

*A11/A12 was a rupture, whether awakening or reminder. Even if we began our careers with the assumption that our institutions and our profession are inherently good, a crisis point such as this one in our personal lives causes us to reexamine our behaviors, not to mention the assumptions and values we espouse in our professional lives.*

*Being a professional requires an apolitical veneer, defended by those in the status quo, yet our professional practice, values, and norms are already imbued with politics. In developing new modes of practice, we experience varying levels of risk. Our positions, relationships, institutional support, labor agreements, personal identities, and professional credentials all affect how (and how vocally) we can advocate for change. Yet our academic positions give us agency. As we become aware of the ideologies we uphold, reproduce, and perpetuate, we are responsible for redefining professionalism. In this moment, the local, national, and professional converge. We must engage with the reality that professional practice is not neutral, nor does structural change happen at the individual level.*

## Prompt 4

**How can we merge personal values with our professional praxis in order to build a better future, while accounting for institutional and other constraints?**

### Erin

I was trained to see library work as value-neutral, and that remains a core tenet of belief for many. Like the ideology that posits UVA as benevolent, it’s ingrained and vital to self-conceptions. To concede that “professionalism” or “tradition” or “the UVA way” upholds violent, racist power structures can be frightening. But we’re talking about it. I also see people coming around to the idea that libraries are always political, even when those politics have been so perfectly aligned with power structures that they’re practically invisible. They feel natural. They feel—for those of us the system is set up to protect—safe.

In her new role, Phylissa is explicitly asking us to confront those contradictions. Her own history with UVA—as part of the second cohort to integrate, and local resident of Charlottesville and Albemarle County—makes it harder to pretend that racism lives “somewhere else,” not here in this “nice town” with “nice people.” Race is being discussed directly, we’re wrestling with a messy legacy:

trying to inhabit history without sanitizing it. It's connecting the origins of this place to the reasons why white nationalists are still drawn here. The potential for violence that was always implicit in (white shoe, popped-collar) country club racism was realized that summer. If people can see that more clearly now, then the work matters.

## Abby

I've been interested in critical librarianship and the intersection between library work and social justice, but thought I could most realistically promote change in the classroom. I hadn't really considered the other resources at our disposal and didn't feel it was my place to spend them. But that summer I knew my work could have an impact and, with this newfound sense of urgency, searched for ways to make it reflect my values.

In my case, as someone without a lot of institutional clout, this took the form of initiating or collaborating on a number of social justice-oriented events. After receiving a grant to host a performance series, "Making Noise," in the Music Library, Dave and I collaborated on the Josh St. Hill event he describes below. We hosted a graduate student who researches sound and racism, discussing how the Unite the Right rally participants invoked sounds from the Civil War to intimidate protestors. As part of the Global Initiatives Group, Erin, Phylissa, and I helped coordinate multiple Black History Month panels on race and media, activism, art, and health. In partnership with the Graduate Student Coalition for Liberation, the student group responsible for the Charlottesville Syllabus, we hosted a hackathon-style event to add more materials by marginalized authors and independent presses to our collections. Several of us brought these issues to conferences, asking how to respond to increasingly common crises, using a matrix adapted from crisis management.<sup>39</sup> Later, we used this matrix in discussions with library staff in anticipation of the A11/A12 anniversary and presented the ideas it generated to our library administration.

Although at first glance these appear to be isolated events without long-term impact on our professional practices, I hope these efforts and others have begun to change community perceptions about the library. Some efforts have had sustained impact: the Hack the Stacks event was so successful that it's been turned into an ongoing series. Once a semester we reach out to different groups on campus who could help us surface materials by and about underrepresented groups. Overall, I think our work has become more community-engaged and empathetic—examples from library colleagues include archiving community responses to A11/A12<sup>40</sup> and sharing UVA-created research with the Charlottesville community—with the result that more and more people are recognizing the library's potential as an activist space.

## Dave

The biggest imperative is to move from theory and dialogue into action and reflection, while acknowledging that it'll be messy and imperfect. For this to happen there has to be a certain level of critical consciousness—an awareness of the world and its contradictions, a belief in one's ability to fight oppression and to critically intervene. I was proud to organize with Abby an installment of the "Making Noise" series in the Music Library, moderated by AD Carson, Assistant Professor of Hip-Hop and the Global South, and featuring two high-schoolers: Josh St. Hill and Amaya Wallace. I was incredibly moved by "A King's Story," the award-winning play that Josh wrote and starred in and that Amaya directed. Josh told the story of a Black teenage male who was murdered by the police and wove in events from 2017's "Summer of Hate." In between scenes Josh rapped powerful, socially conscious lyrics. Each time it was performed, the play garnered a standing ovation. I thought it would be powerful to have Amaya and Josh have a public conversation with AD. The event was well-attended, with Josh and AD engaging the audience with their rapping and freestyling. More importantly, attendees were challenged and grappled with the lyrics that—to borrow Josh's words—had a lot of "jewels" and dialogue that was "full of science."

## Phylissa

My job is to facilitate staffers' engagement of the personal and professional in sustainable ways. We do it with workshops, guest speakers, lectures, reading and film groups, and communal meals. As a woman of color, I have always had race "up in my face," but activities such as these are making it harder to ignore the issues. I'm amused at national conferences when someone asks, "When did your shop last have a conversation about race?" I say, "Um, probably ten minutes ago."

Dave has it right. We need to be deliberate and proactive and *active*. What does action look like? That will be the question when UVA's first Chief Diversity Officer steps down next year. He is an emergency medicine physician and tenured faculty. He cautions his replacement should be tenured as a protective layer fending off executive overreach. It is holding-feet-to-the-fire time. If you want to avoid racist flare-ups, make sure you have plenty of inclusive and equitable retardants.

## Abby, Dave, Erin, Phylissa

*We do this work because we believe a better future is possible. This is a simple point that can be easy to miss. But, despite all of the polarization, tragedies, and injustices we face, we see this historic and cultural moment as a tremendous opportunity. Space that we have not seen before in our lifetime has opened up, locally and nationally, to engage in the serious work of fighting for social, economic, and environmental justice, and we want to rise to meet it.*

*The events of 2017 reminded us that the fight for justice is a long-term struggle that will go on well past our lifetimes. This is what Angela Davis implored our community to remember when she spoke in Charlottesville in March 2018. Change will often occur imperceptibly, and we have to be comfortable with that. To sustain oneself for the long haul requires “sublime madness.”<sup>41</sup>*

*Contrary to seemingly everything in American society that tells us to embrace a rugged individualism, we want to more fully realize our collective agency. Critical librarians and other freedom fighters find themselves on the margins, where it behooves us to embrace solidarity and cooperation as organizing principles. This does not require conformity or the forsaking of individual agency—far from it, though it requires the rejection of other things. The work is easier when we are not riddling one other with fear and anxiety; such actions benefit those in power and drain us of our energy. We can refuse to allow the dominant power structures to consume us and avoid the trap of being consistently in a defensive posture. We can choose, instead, to continually renew a radical hope and imagination.*

## Conclusion

We have grappled with the question of dialogue in an age of political polarization in a real place where that polarization erupted into violence, death, and trauma that cannot be easily dismissed. The problems created by the age of neoliberalism—flat wages, wealth inequality, the erosion of democratic institutions, lack of trust in civic society—have bubbled beneath society’s surface for decades. That they boiled over with the election of the current president in 2016 should surprise no one. Yet while the national conversation has shifted, and neofascists are emboldened, there is pushback. It comes from those who have always recognized white violence as American, along with new forms of resistance from those who have previously had the luxury of blindness. In the space created by these ruptures, we see opportunity for change.

In this chapter and the conversations that shaped it, we have problematized dialogue in a way that goes beyond an academic thought experiment. In turn, we have debated what our collective responsibility is a year after A11/A12. The act of writing this chapter—in both our individual autoethnographies and group reflections—and wrestling with them in innumerable conversations have opened up an avenue for us to process that summer. Our thoughts have emerged as we talk, and write, and argue, and revisit. What results is synthesis that is polyphonic in form as well as style. Throughout, we have actively chosen to avoid prescriptive as well as proscriptive pronouncements. Instead, we offer the questions that have guided our thinking, and those that remain with us, as a collective.

What costs are there for entering into dialogue in the first place? Is that dialogue accessible: physically, emotionally, intellectually? Is the dialogue reproducing class, social, and economic divisions? Does dialogue demand that “both

sides” be included? Does it center marginalized voices: the voices of people of color, women, LGBT, or other oppressed groups? Who do we ask to bear the cost of neofascists’ “free speech”? What is the impact of libraries seeking out dialogue when also defending hate speech?

Is dialogue an inherent good, especially if the power asymmetries between those taking part in it go unexamined? Can dialogue bring us to a place of freedom and truth if power(ful) interests dictate the terms on which that dialogue takes place?

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